

Introduction to International Relations

Introduction to International Relations (IR)

Key concepts, theories, actors, and contemporary issues

1. What Is International Relations?

Aspect	Description
Definition	The systematic study of political, economic, social, and cultural interactions among sovereign states and other global actors.
Scope	Diplomacy, war, trade, international law, global governance, human rights, environment, and transnational issues.
Goal of the Discipline	Explain why states behave the way they do, predict outcomes of international events, and suggest policies for peace, security, and prosperity.

2. Core Units of Analysis

Level	Main Actors	Typical Questions
Systemic	International system (anarchy, distribution of power)	How does the structure of the global arena shape state behavior?
State	Individual sovereign states	What domestic factors (politics, economics, culture) influence foreign policy?
Sub-state	NGOs, multinational corporations (MNCs), terrorist groups, diaspora communities	How do non-state actors affect international outcomes?
Individual	Leaders, policymakers, influential thinkers	How do personal beliefs and decision-making styles impact diplomacy?

3. Major Theoretical Paradigms

Theory	Central Premise	Key Concepts	Representative Scholars
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Realism	States are rational, power? maximizing actors in an anarchic world.	Balance of power, security dilemma, national interest.	Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz
Liberalism	Cooperation is possible through institutions, interdependence, and democratic norms.	International regimes, economic interdependence, democratic peace.	Robert Keohane, Michael Doyle
Constructivism	International politics is socially constructed; ideas, identities, and norms shape behavior.	Norm diffusion, identity formation, discourse.	Alexander Wendt, Martha Finnemore
Marxist / Critical Theories	Global capitalism creates structural inequalities; power is rooted in economic exploitation.	Imperialism, dependency, world?system analysis.	Immanuel Wallerstein, Robert Cox
English School	The world is a society of states bound by shared rules and institutions.	International society, world society, pluralism vs. solidarism.	Hedley Bull, Martin Wight
Feminist IR	Gender shapes and is shaped by international politics; mainstream IR overlooks women's experiences.	Gendered security, feminist epistemology.	Cynthia Enloe, J. Ann Tickner

Tip: Most scholars use a **theoretical blend**—e.g., a realist view of security combined with liberal ideas about institutions.

4. Fundamental Concepts & Vocabulary

Concept	Meaning	Example
Anarchy	Absence of a central authority above states.	No world government to enforce rules.
Sovereignty	Supreme authority within a territory.	The United Nations can only act with member consent.
Balance of Power	States align to prevent any one from becoming dominant.	NATO's formation during the Cold War.

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Concept	Meaning	Example
Security Dilemma	One state's security measures provoke fear in others, leading to arms races.	India-Pakistan nuclear buildup.
Soft Power	Ability to shape preferences through culture, values, and policies.	South Korea's global influence via K-pop and technology.
Hard Power	Use of coercive means—military force or economic sanctions.	US sanctions on Iran.